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(54) **DISTRIBUTED NETWORK COMMUNICATION SYSTEM WHICH PROVIDES DIFFERENT NETWORK ACCESS FEATURES**

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Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation-in-part of application No. 09/551,291, filed on Apr. 18, 2000.

(57) **ABSTRACT**

(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **G06F 15/173**
(52) **U.S. Cl.** **709/225; 709/203; 709/229; 370/431**
(58) **Field of Search** **709/200, 203, 709/225, 229; 370/431**

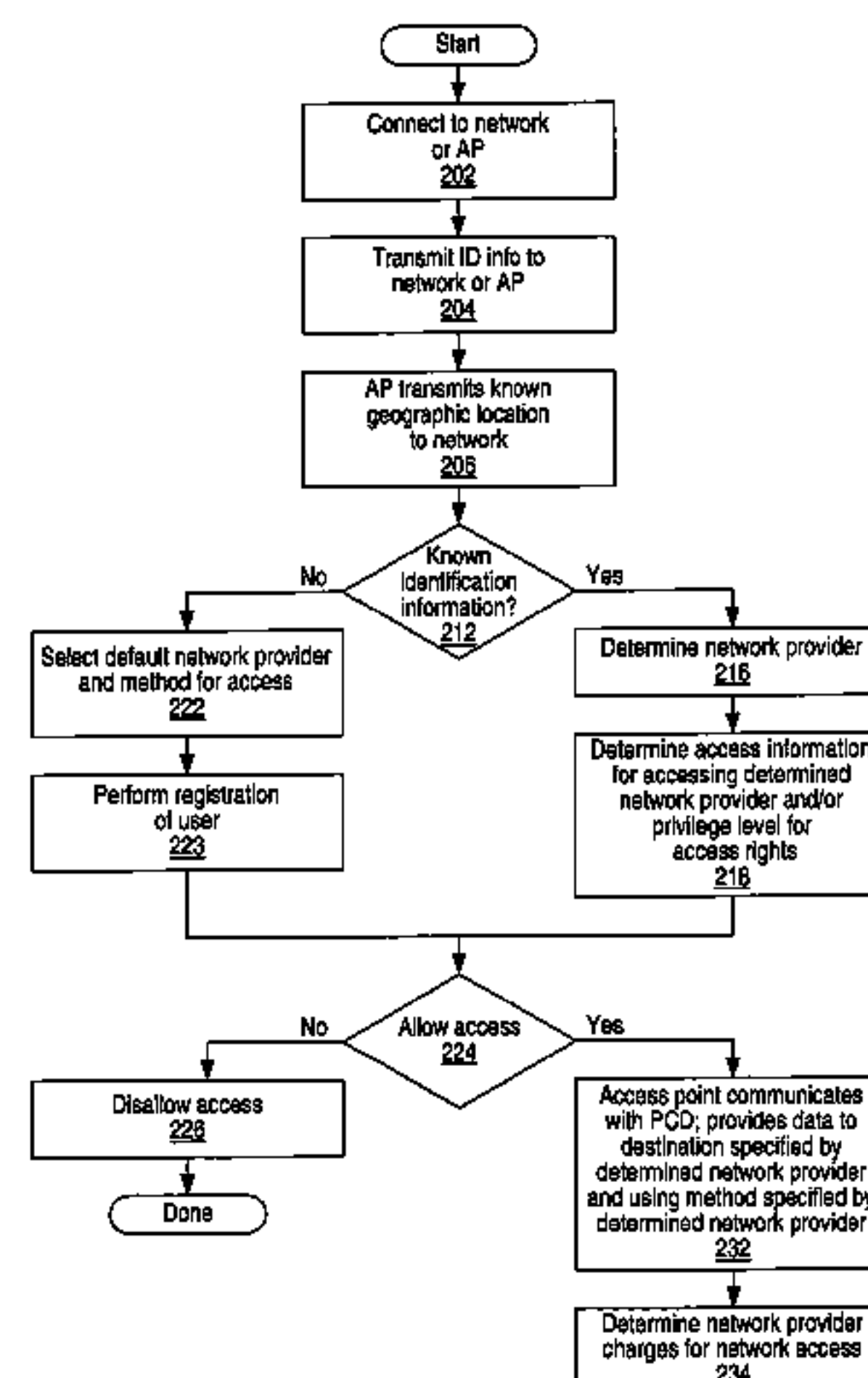
A system and method for providing multiple access levels to users of a wireless network system. The network system includes a plurality of wireless access points coupled to a network. A portable computing device (PCD) of a user may store identification information which indicates an access or privilege level for the user of the PCD. The access level may determine the network access and/or services available to the user of the PCD. The identification information may include a System ID of the PCD. The network system may store a list of identification information and a corresponding list of access levels. When the access point receives the identification information from a PCD of a user, the access point may determine the appropriate access level for the portable computing device using the identification information. Network access and services may then be provided to the portable computing device at the indicated level.

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53 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



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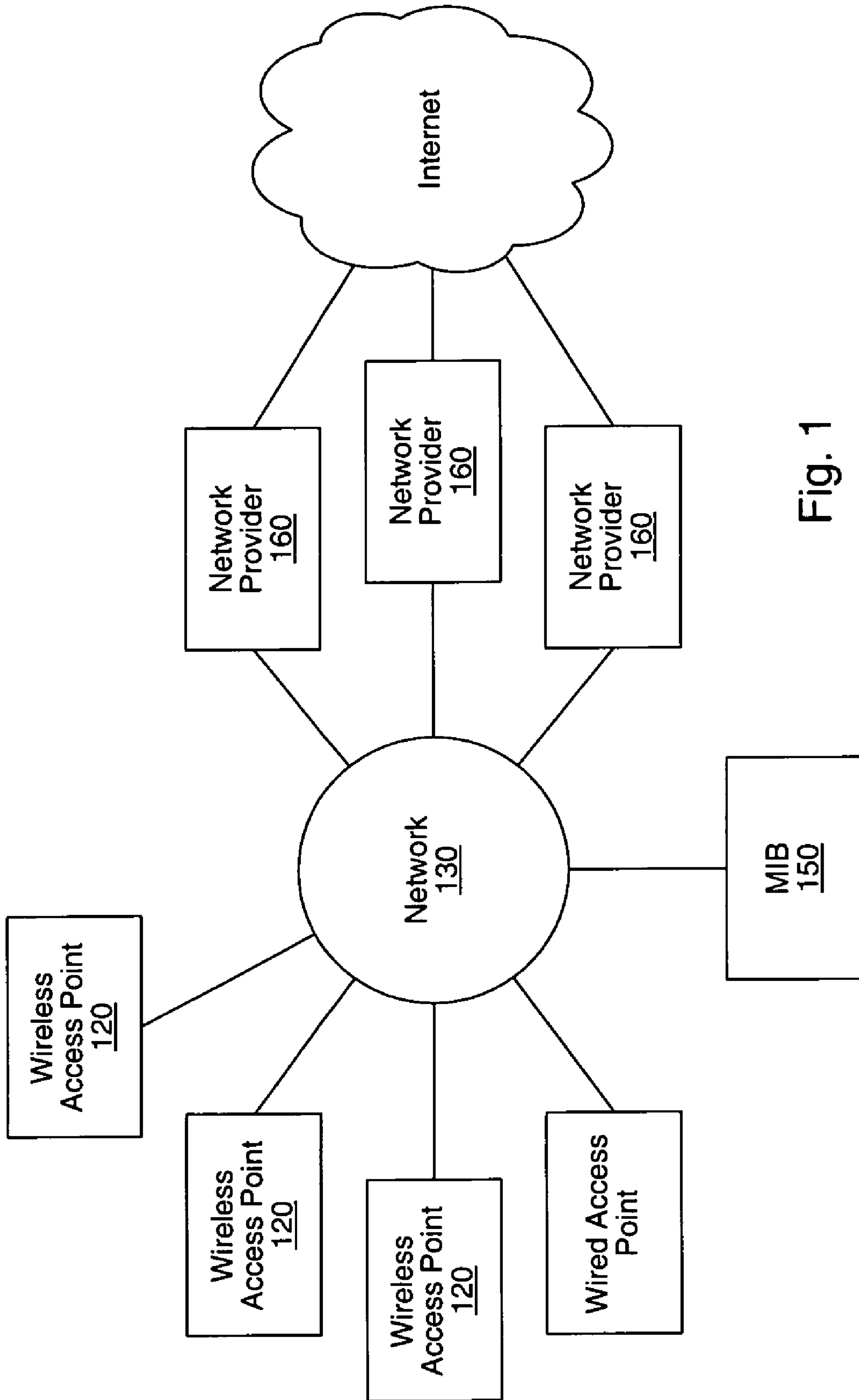


Fig. 1

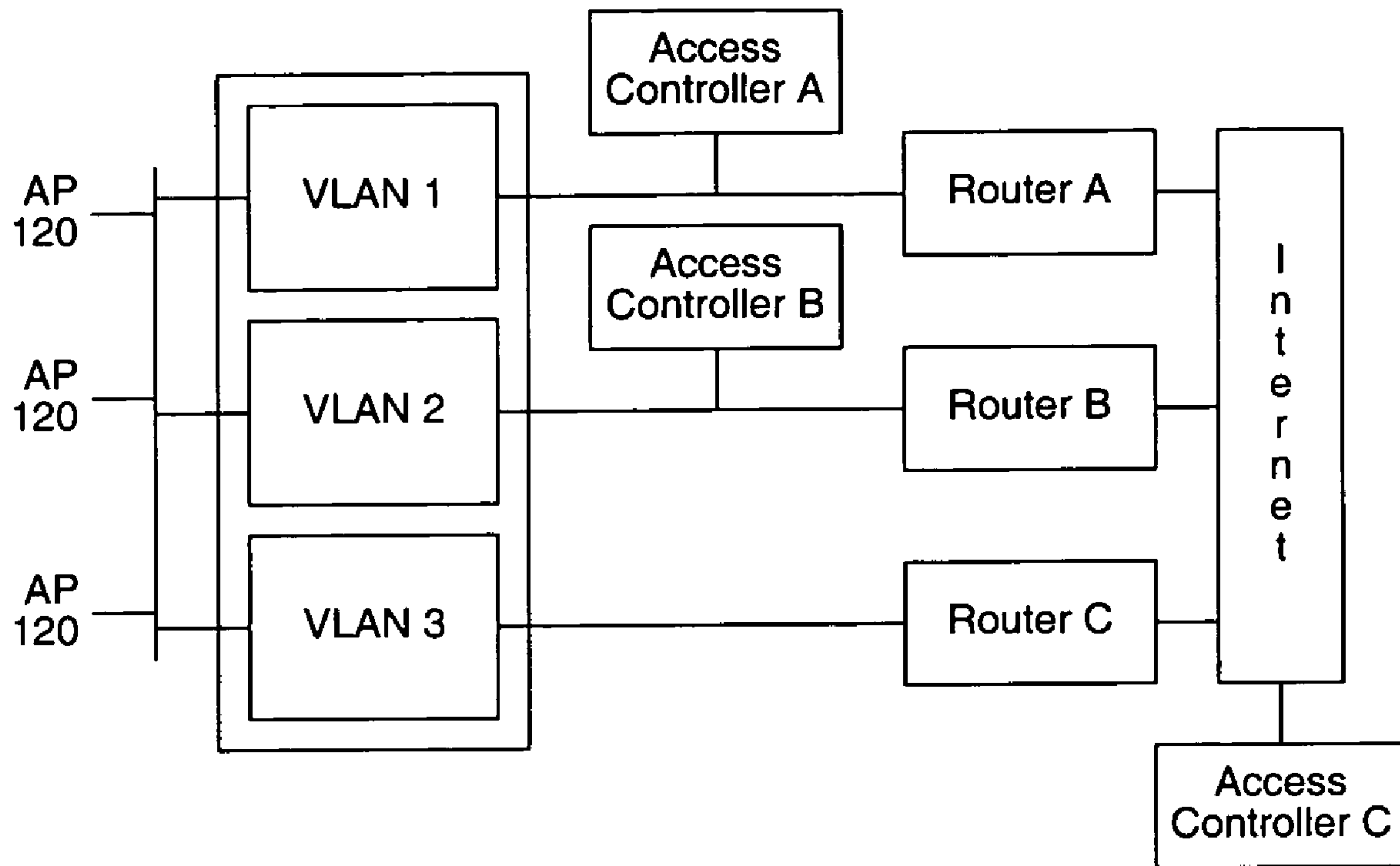


Fig. 2

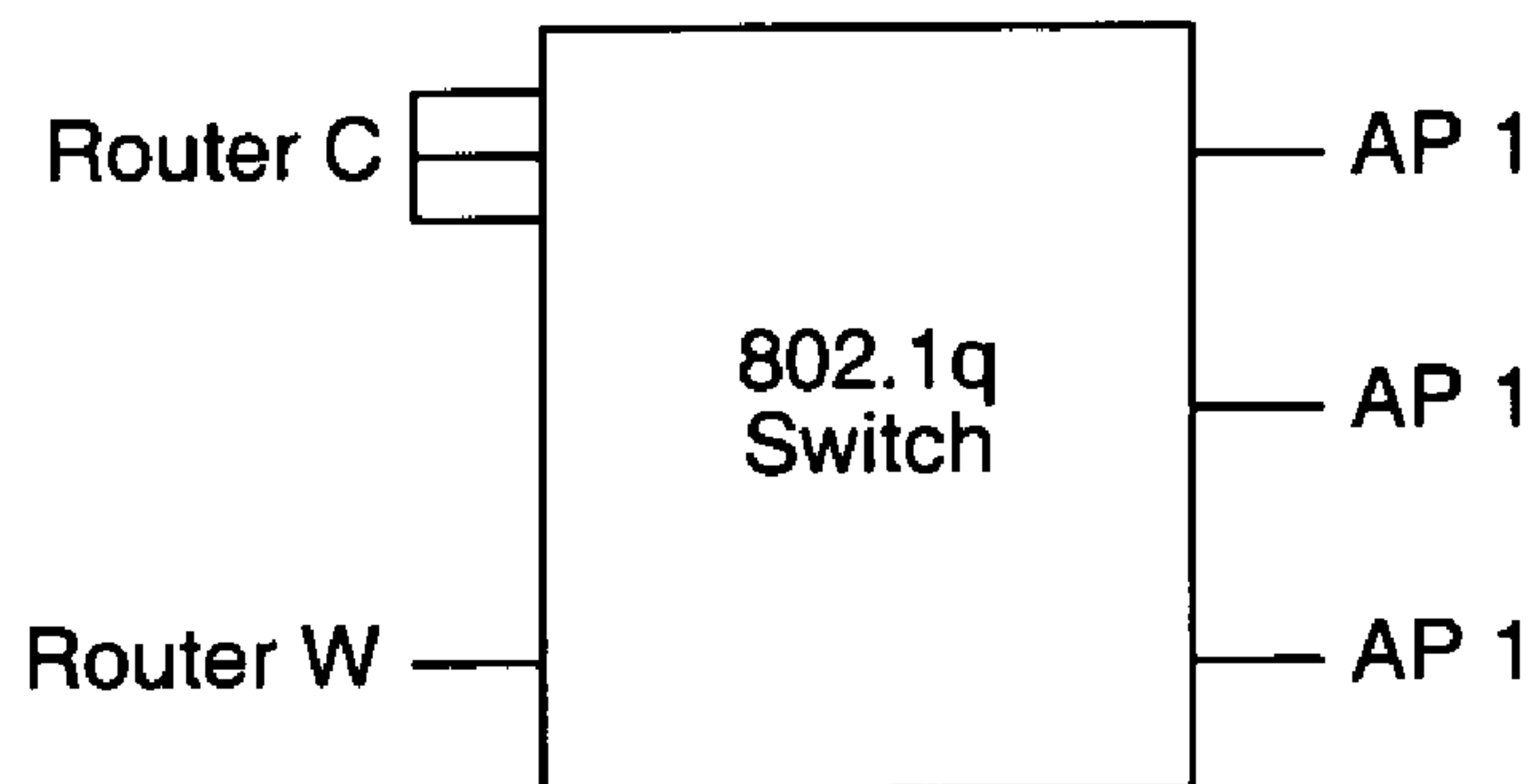


Fig. 3

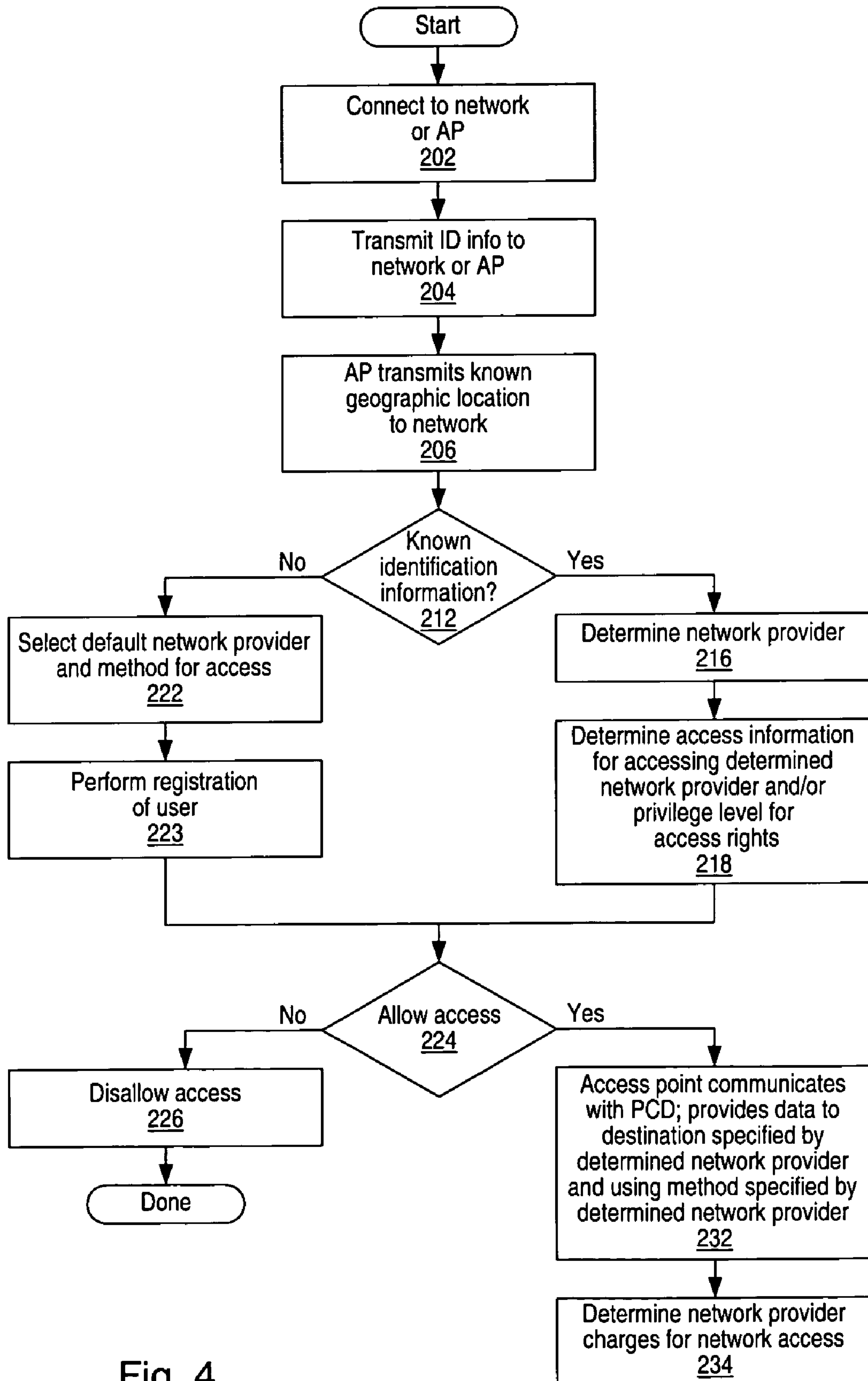


Fig. 4

Identification information 1	Network provider 1	Access method/destination 1 Access level 1
Identification information 2	Network provider 2	Access method/destination 2 Access level 2
Identification information 3	Network provider 3	Access method/destination 3 Access level 3
Identification information 4	Network provider 4	Access method/destination 4 Access level 4
Identification information 5	Network provider 5	Access method/destination 5 Access level 5

Fig. 5

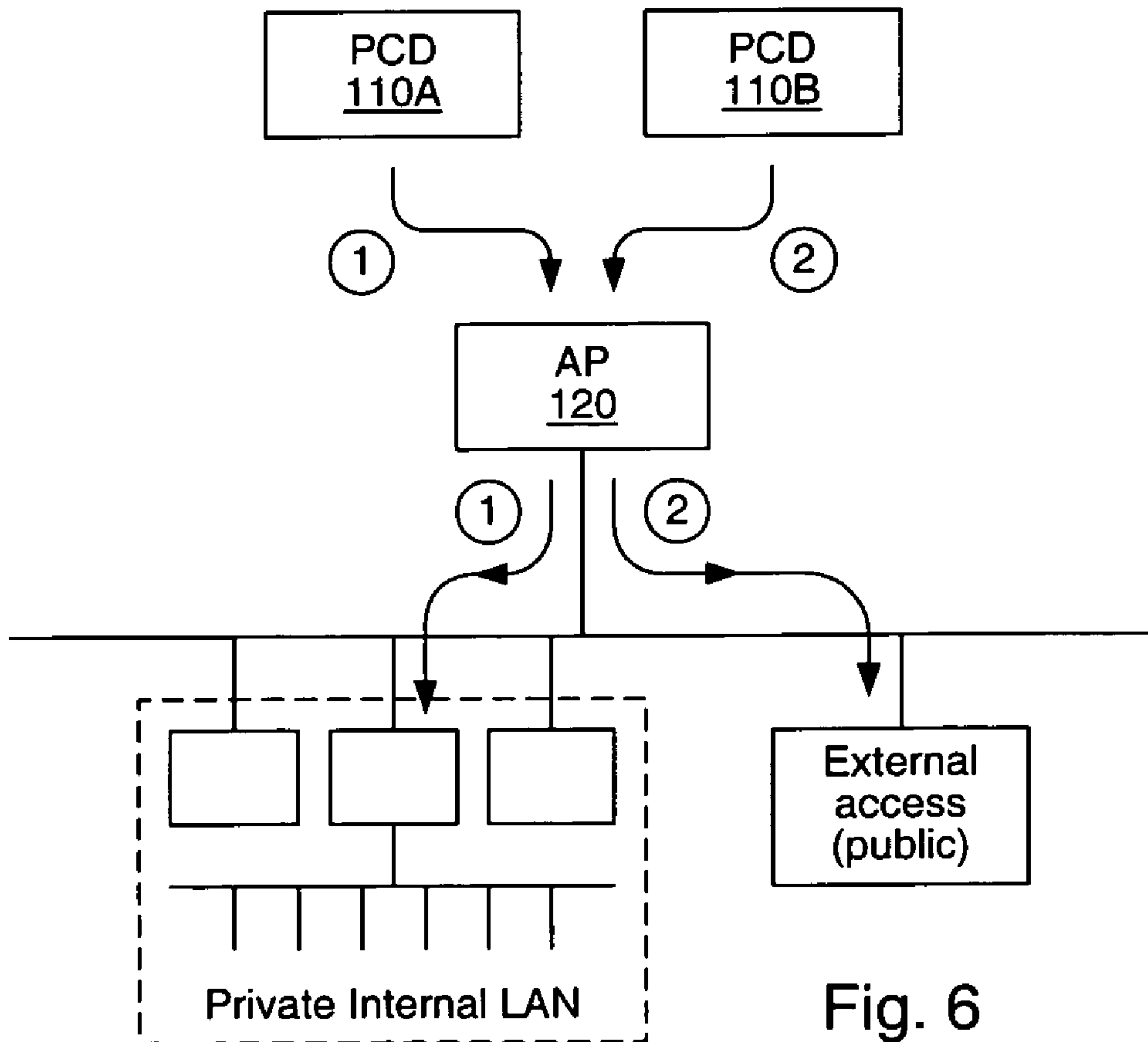


Fig. 6

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**DISTRIBUTED NETWORK
COMMUNICATION SYSTEM WHICH
PROVIDES DIFFERENT NETWORK ACCESS
FEATURES**

CONTINUATION DATA

This is a continuation-in-part of co-pending application Ser. No. 09/551,291 titled "A Distributed Network Communication System which Enables Multiple Network Providers to use a Common Distributed Network Infrastructure" and filed on Apr. 18, 2000, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart and James Thompson, which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending application Ser. No. 09/433,818 titled "A Network Communication Service with an Improved Subscriber Model Using Digital Certificates" and filed on Nov. 3, 1999, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart and James W. Thompson.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to network communications, and more specifically to a system and method enabling a network infrastructure to support multiple access levels for users of a wired or wireless network system.

2. Description of the Related Art

Various types of wireless infrastructures are being developed to service users of computing devices, such as portable computing devices (PCDs). Currently, numerous providers are attempting to install wireless network infrastructures in various locations, such as airports, hotels, office buildings, etc. for use by various users.

IEEE 802.11 defines the IEEE standard for wireless Ethernet. IEEE 802.11 is designed to support multiple overlapping wireless local area networks (LANs) in a given coverage area. Each wireless local area network will typically include one or more access points which communicate in a wireless fashion with a corresponding computing device of a user, which typically includes a wireless Ethernet transceiver. IEEE 802.11 currently uses a System ID (SID) to "select" which LAN to use and which access point with which to associate.

The users of such wireless networks may have differing network service needs. For example, a business traveler on lay-over at an airport may desire information about restaurants in the airport or local area, while another traveler may require email services and/or Internet access. Thus, difference users of the wireless network may need different levels of network access and services.

However, there is currently no known method or system for providing multiple levels of network access and services to users of wireless networks. It would thus be desirable to provide a distributed wireless network system which can selectively provide different access levels to users of the system.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

One embodiment of the present invention comprises a system and method for providing access level features on a distributed network system. The network system includes a plurality of wireless access points coupled to a network. The access points (APs) for the network may be widely distributed in various facilities, such as airports, mass-transit stations, and various businesses, such as business offices, restaurants, and stores, e.g., coffee shops or restaurants at an

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airport. The network may couple to a wide area network, such as the Internet. A plurality of network providers may provide various levels of network services, such as Internet access, over the network infrastructure. In one embodiment, the levels of network services may include providing user access to specific sub-nets of the network, to the exclusion of the network at large.

In one embodiment, a user, also referred to as a subscriber, may access the network system through a portable computing device (PCD) using, for example, a wireless network interface card. When in sufficiently close range to an access point (AP), the PCD may wirelessly access the network system. In one embodiment, the APs are arranged at known geographic locations and may provide geographic location information regarding the geographic location of the AP or the mobile user.

Each PCD may store identification information which may indicate an access level for that PCD. The access level may specify a particular level of network access and/or services available to the user of the PCD. In one embodiment, the access level may denote user access to particular sub-networks of the overall network, i.e., the rest of the network may be inaccessible to the PCD/user. In one embodiment, the identification information may also uniquely indicate at least one network provider of a plurality of possible network providers. The identification information thus may designate the network provider (or providers) to which the user of the PCD is a subscriber, as well as the access level of the PCD/user. The identification information may take various forms, such as a System ID (SID), Media Access Control (MAC) ID, or other identification which may be used to identify the user's access level, and the network provider to which the user has subscribed. When the PCD becomes close to an access point, the PCD may provide the identification information to the access point.

In one embodiment, each of the access points are operable to "listen for" or detect identification information, e.g., System IDs, which uniquely identify the PCD and indicate an access level for that PCD. Alternatively, each of the access points may be operable to broadcast requests for identification information, e.g., broadcast requests for System IDs to the PCDs, wherein the PCDs may respond to this broadcast by providing the identification information. When the access point receives the identification information from a PCD of a user, the access point may determine the access level for the portable computing device using the identification information. Thus, the network system is able to recognize and process identification information which identifies the PCD access level. In one embodiment, the APs answer all queries from all PCDs, even if the identification information from the PCD does not match the information available to that particular AP, e.g., even if an unknown SID is received. In such a case, a default access level may be assigned to the PCD.

In one embodiment, the network system may include a memory medium which stores a list of identification information that maps to a corresponding list of access levels. The memory medium may be comprised in one or more of, or all of, the access points, or may be comprised in one or more other devices connected to the network, such as a computer system. In this embodiment, determining the access level for the portable computing device includes accessing the memory medium and using the received identification information to determine the access level. For example, the access point or other device may use the received System ID to index into a table to determine the appropriate access level.

The memory medium may also store associated access information. The access information may include access methods for providing user data to a network provider, such as a destination IP address of the network provider. The access information stored on the memory medium may also include the access level which indicates the user's access rights or privilege level. Thus, the local network may provide various local resources which are available to all users regardless of access level, and users with a higher access level may in addition be entitled to Internet access. In other environments, all users may receive Internet access, and users with a lower access level may not be entitled to view or utilize certain or all local network resources on the network. Thus, depending on the access level, the user may be provided solely with external Internet access, or only local network access, or may be provided with no network services. The access level may also possibly depend on the known geographic location of the AP or the user. For example, the access level for each user may vary depending on the known geographic location of the AP to which the user is currently associated.

In one embodiment, one or more of the network provider ID and the access information may be provided by the PCD of the user. Thus, an access point or other device on the network may not be required to perform a look-up to determine this information, but rather this information may be provided by the PCD.

When the portable computing device communicates with the access point, the network access corresponding to the user's access level may be provided to the portable computing device through the determined network provider. For example, the access point may provide the data to a destination based on or specified by the determined network provider, e.g., may provide or route the data to the determined network provider's site, e.g., to equipment provided by the network provider. The network provider may then provide Internet access and/or provide other network services commensurate with the user's access level. The network provider will also typically charge a fee for this service. The access point preferably provides the data to the destination in a secure manner to prevent the data from being unintentionally provided to third parties, such as other providers.

Thus the network system is useable by subscribers at various levels of access or service. In one embodiment, the subscribers may be enabled to "roam" on various networks, including networks maintained by other providers. For example, the plurality of access points may be maintained by a first network provider, and a subscriber of a second network provider may be recognized and allowed use of the network. Alternatively, the plurality of access points may be maintained by an independent third party, and subscribers of any of various network providers may be recognized and allowed use of the network. Network providers may charge subscribers for access regardless of who operates or maintains the network. In addition, the network system may selectively provide different access levels to network resources depending on the access or privilege level of the user. This allows visitors or non-members of a network system to be allowed certain network services, such as Internet access, without compromising other private network resources.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Other objects and advantages of the invention will become apparent upon reading the following detailed

description and upon reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of one embodiment of a wireless network system;

FIG. 2 is a more detailed block diagram of one embodiment of the wireless network system of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of another embodiment of the wireless network system of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is a flowchart of a process of allowing access to a wireless network system which facilitates different access levels for users;

FIG. 5 illustrates an example of a data structure which stores network provider and access information; and

FIG. 6 illustrates selectively allowing access to a wireless network system using various access levels.

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments thereof are shown by way of example in the drawings and will herein be described in detail. It should be understood, however, that the drawings and detailed description thereto are not intended to limit the invention to the particular form disclosed, but on the contrary, the intention is to cover all modifications, equivalents and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

Incorporation by Reference

U.S. Pat. No. 5,835,061, titled "Method and Apparatus for Geographic-Based Communications Service", whose inventor is Brett B. Stewart, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

U.S. Pat. No. 5,969,678, titled "System for Hybrid Wired and Wireless Geographic-Based Communications Service", whose inventor is Brett B. Stewart, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/433,817 titled "Geographic Based Communications Service" and filed on Nov. 3, 1999, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart and James W. Thompson, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/433,818 titled "A Network Communications Service with an Improved Subscriber Model Using Digital Certificates" and filed on Nov. 3, 1999, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart and James W. Thompson, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/551,309 titled "System and Method for Managing User Demographic Information Using Digital Certificates" and filed on Apr. 18, 2000, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart and James W. Thompson, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/551,291 titled "Distributed Network Communication System with Roaming Features" and filed on, Apr. 18, 2000, whose inventors are Brett B. Stewart, James W. Thompson, and Kathleen E. McClelland, is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety as though fully and completely set forth herein.

FIG. 1—Network Communication System

FIG. 1 shows one embodiment of a distributed network communication system **100**. The network system **100** may include one or more access points **120**, preferably a plurality

of access points **120**. At least a subset of the access points **120** are wireless access points (APs) **120** which communicate with a portable computing device (PCD) **110** in a wireless fashion. Each wireless access point (AP) **120** may have a wireless connection or transceiver (e.g., an antenna) and may operate according to various wireless standards, such as wireless Ethernet (IEEE 802.11). One or more of the access points **120** may also be wired access points which communicate with a portable computing device **110** in a wired fashion.

Each AP **120** may be coupled to a network **130**. The network **130** may comprise a wired network, a wireless network or a combination of wired and wireless networks. For example, the network **130** may be a standard “wired” Ethernet network which connects each of the wireless (and wired) access points **120** together. The network **130** may also be a wireless network based on IEEE 802.11. The network **130** may form part of the Internet, or may couple to other networks, e.g., other local or wide area networks, such as the Internet.

The network **130** may also include or be coupled to other types of communications networks, (e.g., other than the Internet) such as the public switched telephone network (PSTN), whereby a user using PCD **110** may send and receive information from/to the PSTN or other communication network through a network provider. The network **130** may also include, or be coupled to, another wide area network **130**, such as a proprietary WAN. The network **130** thus may be, or be coupled to, any of various wide area networks (WANs) or local area networks (LANs), including the Internet.

The access points (APs) **120** may be widely distributed in various facilities, such as airports, mass-transit stations, shopping malls, restaurants and other businesses, such as business offices, law firm offices, retail stores, etc. For example, where the access points **120** are distributed in an airport, one or more access points **120** may be distributed throughout various terminals in the airport, in an airline club, and in coffee shops, restaurants or rental car counters at the respective airport. The access points **120** may thus be primarily designed to service mobile users, wherein it may not be known ahead of time which mobile users will be accessing the network from which locations. Thus the network system **100** is preferably a distributed network system, with access points placed in locations to service mobile users. This differs from a conventional fixed LAN, which is generally pre-configured as to which pre-determined users will be using which nodes in the fixed LAN on a day-to-day basis, and as to the relative access levels that these pre-determined users have.

Each access point **120** may comprise information used to identify or select a network provider for a particular user, as well as related access information to enable the network provider to provide access. When in sufficiently close range to an access point **120**, or when the PCD **110** is directly coupled to an access point **120** in a wired fashion, the PCD **110** may access the network utilizing a particular network provider, as discussed further below.

A user operating a portable computing device (PCD) **110** may communicate with one of the access points **120** to gain access to network services, such as Internet access. The portable computing device (PCD) **110** may have a wireless communication device, e.g., a wireless Ethernet card, for communicating with a wireless access point **120**. The portable computing device (PCD) **110** may instead have a wired communication device, e.g., an Ethernet card, for communicating with a wired access point **120**.

The portable computing device **110** may be any of various types of devices, including a computer system, such as a portable computer, a personal digital assistant (PDA), an Internet appliance, a communications device, or other wired or wireless device. The PCD may include various wireless or wired communication devices, such as a wireless Ethernet card, paging logic, RF communication logic, a wired Ethernet card, a modem, a DSL device, an ISDN device, an ATM device, a parallel or serial port bus interface, or other type of communication device.

The PCD **110** preferably includes a memory medium which stores identification information indicating a network provider to which the user has subscribed, and access information indicating a level of access and/or services available to the user. The indicated network provider may be one of a plurality of possible network providers that provide Internet access or other network services in a network system such as that shown in FIG. 1. The identification information may include a System ID (an 802.11 System ID), a MAC ID of a wireless Ethernet device comprised in the PCD **110**, the name of the network provider, or other type of information that uniquely identifies one (or more) network providers. The identification information may also include access level information for the user, as described above. In one embodiment, the identification information may include a user identification which may be used to look up corresponding access level information for that user. The identification information may be contained in a digital certificate, which may be stored in a web browser or other location of the personal computing device **110**.

Where the access point **120** is a wireless access point **120**, the wireless communication may be accomplished in a number of ways. In one embodiment, PCD **110** and wireless AP **120** may both be equipped with an appropriate transmitter and receiver compatible in power and frequency range (e.g., 2.4 GHz) to establish a wireless communication link. Wireless communication may also be accomplished through cellular, digital, or infrared communication technologies, among others. To provide user identification and/or ensure security, the PCD **110** may use any of various security mechanisms.

Where the access point **120** is a wired access point **120**, the wired connection may be accomplished through a variety of different ports, connectors, and transmission media. For example, the PCD **110** may be connected through an Ethernet, USB, serial, or parallel transmission cables, among others. The PCD **110** may also include various communication devices for connecting to the AP **120**, such as wired Ethernet cards, modems, DSL adapters, ATM adapters, ISDN devices, or other communication devices. For example, a hotel may have Ethernet connections in the restaurants, shops, and guest rooms. An airline club, e.g., an airport Admiral’s Club, may also have both wireless and wired connections for mobile users. A user may connect to a wired access point **120** through the use of a laptop computer (PCD **110**), an Ethernet network card, and a network cable. This connection may provide the same functionality as a connection made to a wireless AP **120** as discussed above. In other words, a user using a wired PCD **110** may be able to “roam” on various network infrastructures in the same manner as a user using a wireless PCD **110**.

One or more network providers may each have an associated network device **160** coupled to the network **130**. For example, FIG. 1 illustrates network devices **160** associated with three different network providers. The network devices **160** may take any of various forms, such as a computer system, router, bridge, etc. It is noted that network providers

may provide network services at a location without being required to locate any equipment or bandwidth at a network location. For example, a network provider may combine VLANs and IP tunneling to avoid having to locate any equipment or bandwidth at a particular network location.

A user operating a portable computing device **110** will typically have previously subscribed with one (or more) network providers. Examples of network providers include Wayport, MobileStar and Softnet, among others. As discussed further below, when the PCD **110** of a user communicates with an AP **120**, the respective network provider to which the user is subscribed may be determined. If no previous affiliation with a network provider is detected, a default network provider may be selected. After the network provider is determined or selected, an access level associated with the PCD **110** (or user of the PCD **110**) may be determined, then appropriate network access or services may be provided through that network provider. For example, data or packets from the respective PCD **110** may be routed to a destination designated by the respective network provider, such as the respective provider's network device **160**. This effectively allows a plurality of network providers to each offer specified levels of access and services on a common network infrastructure. This also allows subscribers of various network providers to "roam" on other networks, such as networks installed and/or maintained by other providers, or networks maintained by independent third parties.

The network system **100** may also include a management information base (MIB) **150**. The MIB **150** may be a mechanism, such as a memory, which may allow the persistent storage and management of information needed by network **130** to operate. For example, in one embodiment of the invention, the MIB **150** may store a data structure, such as a table comprising a list of identification information, a corresponding list of the plurality of possible network providers. The data structure may also store access information, which may comprise associated methods for providing data to the respective plurality of possible network providers. The access information may further comprise access level or privilege level information. Thus, the data structure may comprise a table having a plurality of tuples, with each tuple having the identification information, e.g., a System ID, the corresponding network provider, and access information including a method of access to the provider, possibly including a destination IP address or other methodology for accessing the provider's site, and a user access or privilege level. In an alternate embodiment, as noted above, the data structures which store this information may be comprised in each of the access points **120**, or may be provided in various other locations.

As discussed further below, when a portable communication device **110** of a user begins communication with an access point **120**, the network provider and access level for the portable computing device **110** may be determined using this data structure. The memory medium containing the data structure may be accessed, and received network provider identification and access level information from the respective portable computing device **110** may be used to index into the data structure or table to determine the network provider and access level. The appropriate access method may also be accessed and used for enabling the network provider to provide network services, e.g., the access method may be used for providing the data from the respective portable computing device **110** to the determined net-

work provider. The access level information may be used to determine a user's access to local network resources or Internet access.

The MIB **150** may store other information, such as a directory of all the elements (e.g., APs, PCDs, etc) in the network, the topology of the network, characteristics of individual network elements, characteristics of connection links, performance and trend statistics, and any information which is of interest in the operation of the network **130**. For example, the MIB may store the precise longitude, latitude, altitude and other geographic information pinpointing the location of each access point.

One or more service providers **140** may also be coupled to the network **130** or other networks to which the network **130** is coupled, such as the Internet **170**. As used herein, the term "service provider" is intended to include various types of service and information providers which may be connected to the network **130**. The service provider **140** may take any of various forms and may provide any of various services or information. Each service provider **140** may include one or more computers or computer systems configured to provide goods, information, and/or services as appropriate for the service provider. The one or more service providers **140** may couple to the network in a wired or wireless fashion.

The network communication system **100** may be geographic-based. In other words, the network communication system **100** may provide information and/or services to the user based at least partly on the known geographic location of the user, e.g., as indicated by the access points **120** or as indicated by geographic information (e.g., GPS information) provided from the PCD **110**. In one embodiment, the APs **120** may be arranged at known geographic locations and may provide geographic location information regarding the geographic location of the user or the PCD **110**. In another embodiment, the PCD **110** may provide geographic location information of the PCD **110** through the AP **120** to the network **130**. For example, the PCD **110** may include GPS (Global Positioning System) equipment to enable the PCD **110** to provide its geographic location through the AP **120** to the network **130**, such as to a service provider **140** coupled to the network **130**.

Memory Medium and Carrier Medium

One or more of the systems described above, such as PCD **110**, access points **120**, MIB **150**, and network providers **160** may include a memory medium on which computer programs or data according to the present invention may be stored. For example, each of the access points **120** and/or the MIB **150** may store a data structure as described above comprising information regarding identification information, corresponding network providers **160**, access information such as associated data routing methods, and access level information. Each of the access points **120** and/or the MIB **150** may further store a software program for accessing these data structures and using the information therein to properly provide or route data between users (subscribers) and their corresponding network providers, to selectively provide or route data depending on the access information, or to provide selected levels of access or services to the users.

The term "memory medium" is intended to include various types of memory or storage, including an installation medium, e.g., a CD-ROM, or floppy disks **104**, a random access memory or computer system memory such as DRAM, SRAM, EDO RAM, Rambus RAM, EPROM, EEPROM, flash memory etc., or a non-volatile memory

such as a magnetic media, e.g., a hard drive, or optical storage. The memory medium may comprise other types of memory as well, or combinations thereof. In addition, the memory medium may be located in a first computer in which the programs are executed, or may be located in a second different computer which connects to the first computer over a network. In the latter instance, the second computer provides the program instructions to the first computer for execution. The memory medium may also be a distributed memory medium, e.g., for security reasons, where a portion of the data is stored on one memory medium and the remaining portion of the data may be stored on a different memory medium. Also, the memory medium may be one of the networks to which the current network is coupled, e.g., a SAN (Storage Area Network).

Also, each of the systems described above may take various forms, including a personal computer system, main-frame computer system, workstation, network appliance, Internet appliance, personal digital assistant (PDA), television system or other device. In general, the term "computer system" can be broadly defined to encompass any device having a processor which executes instructions from a memory medium.

The memory medium in one or more of the above systems thus may store a software program or data for performing or enabling roaming or selective network resource access within a network system **100**. A CPU or processing unit in one or more of the above systems executing code and data from a memory medium comprises a means for executing the software program according to the methods or flowcharts described below.

Various embodiments further include receiving or storing instructions and/or data implemented in accordance with the present description upon a carrier medium. Suitable carrier media include memory media as described above, as well as signals such as electrical, electromagnetic, or other forms of analog or digital signals, conveyed via a communication medium such as networks and/or a wireless link.

FIGS. 2 & 3: Block Diagrams of Two Embodiments of a Wireless Network System

FIG. 2 is a more detailed block diagram illustrating a portion of the wireless network system of FIG. 1. FIG. 2 illustrates an embodiment having three access points **120** which each couple through a respective VLAN, labeled VLAN1, VLAN2 and VLAN3. Each of VLAN1, VLAN2 and VLAN3 in turn couple to respective routers **160**, labeled router A, router B and router C, which are provided by the respective network providers A, B and C respectively. These routers in turn couple to the Internet. As shown, one or more access controllers, e.g., computer systems configured to determine or control network service access, may be provided for each of the network providers. The access controllers operate to verify user or subscriber access to the respective provider's network. FIG. 2 illustrates access controller A, access controller B and access controller C. As shown, access controllers A and B are coupled to router A and router B respectively. However, the access controller may be located outside of the local network **130**, e.g., may be comprised on any of various locations on the Internet, as shown with respect to access controller C.

In this embodiment, the data structure may store an identification information/VLAN tag mapping, e.g., an SID/VLAN tag mapping, which operates to map the user to the appropriate VLAN of the user's network provider.

As shown, each of VLAN1, VLAN2 and VLAN3 may be supported in one or more Ethernet switches which support

tagged VLANs (IEEE 802.1q). In addition, the switch may also support IEEE 802.1p, which provides various quality of service (QoS) metrics. This enables the switches to enforce certain predefined quality of service metrics to any given port or virtual port contained within the network. As shown in FIG. 3, it is also noted that a router may be present on more than one VLAN. As shown, FIG. 3 includes an 802.1q switch which couples to three access points referred to as access point 1 (AP1), access point 2 (AP2), and access point 3 (AP3). As shown, a router labeled router C may be coupled to two or more VLANs as shown.

Using VLANs, each access point **120** preferably has the ability to transmit/receive on one or more VLAN IPs to one or more service providers. This permits, but does not require, that each network provider use its own network numbering plan. At most, each network provider may have an access controller and a router at each coverage location. As shown in FIG. 3, the access controller is not required to be physically located at the coverage location, but rather may be located anywhere.

FIG. 4—Network Access Facilitating Different Levels of Access for Users

FIG. 4 is a flowchart illustrating a process of allowing selective access to a wireless network system. In one embodiment, as described above, the PCD **110** includes identification information, preferably comprising a System ID, stored in the memory of the PCD **110**. The identification information may store information which identifies one (or more) network providers to which the user of PCD **110** is a subscriber, and access level information which may be used to indicate one or more network access or privilege levels. In one embodiment, a user may have a different access or privilege level for each network provider to which the user is subscribed. This stored access level information may be used to selectively allow user access to different parts of the network. In one embodiment, the network access method of the present invention may be operable to receive and use the identification information to facilitate roaming, e.g., to allow a particular network provider to be selected and used for a user operating on the network.

As shown, in step **202** the user connects to the network (e.g., to an access point of the network). For example, the user may be walking in an airport with a portable computing device and may connect in a wireless fashion to an access point located at the airport. In another scenario, the user may enter a hotel room and connect in a wireless fashion to an Ethernet port in his/her room which is connected to the network. In another scenario, the user may enter an office of a business, such as a law firm or corporation, and may connect in a wireless or wired fashion to an access point located in that office. Thus, the user may connect to the network or an access point of the network in any of various locations in a wireless or wired fashion.

In step **204** the personal computing device (PCD) **110** of the user transmits identification information (ID information) to an access point (AP) **120** of the network. The identification information may take any of various forms. In one embodiment, the identification information comprises a System ID (SID) according to IEEE 802.11. As discussed above, IEEE 802.11 (wireless Ethernet) is designed to support multiple overlapping wireless LANs in a given coverage area. IEEE 802.11 uses the System ID (SID) to "select" which LAN to use, and thus which access point with which to associate. In this embodiment each System ID may be uniquely associated with a respective network provider, and thus the user may configure the System ID on his/her

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PCD **110** to uniquely identify the network provider to which the user has selected or subscribed.

The identification information may also or instead be a MAC (media access controller) ID which is comprised on a wireless Ethernet card of the personal computing device used by the user. The MAC ID may perform a similar purpose in selecting the network provider. As noted above, the identification information may take various forms. For example, the identification information may simply comprise the name of the respective provider and the appropriate access information, which may be contained in a digital certificate. The identification information may comprise other types of network provider identification as desired.

In prior art systems, access points are only able to “listen for” one System ID which corresponds to one network provider. According to one embodiment of the invention, each access point **120** is operable to “listen for” or “detect” a plurality of different sets of identification information, e.g., a plurality of different System IDs, which may correspond to a plurality of different possible network providers, or which may correspond to unknown network providers. Thus, each AP may be set up to “listen” for all types of identification information, e.g., listen for all SIDs, and to answer all queries from PCDs **110**, even if the identification information or SID is not recognized by the particular AP **120**. Alternatively, each of the access points may be operable to broadcast requests for identification information. For example, each of the access points may periodically broadcast requests for SIDs. Alternatively, each of the access points may periodically broadcast recognized System IDs to the PCDs, i.e., broadcast the sets of SIDs the access point supports, wherein the PCDs may respond to this broadcast by providing the identification information.

In step **206** the access point **120** to which the user has connected may transmit known geographic location information to the network (e.g., to a network provider on the network). This known geographic location information may originate from the AP **120** or from the PCD **110** of the user. As discussed further below, this known geographic location information may be used in various ways. For example, the geographic location information may be used in selecting among two or more possible network providers to which the user has previously subscribed, or may be used in selecting the default provider.

The geographic location information may also be used in determining the network services or access privileges of the user, or used in determining charging aspects of the use. For example, this known geographic location information may be used to determine whether a third party pays for the network access of the user. As one example, an employer of the user (employee) may have previously directed that the employer will pay for network access of the employee if the employee is located in an airport or hotel, but not if the employee is located, for example, in a bar. The known geographic location may also be used to determine a charge rate, based on various incentive or sponsorship programs of which the user is a member. For example, the user may receive a discount if he/she uses network access from certain locations, such as a certain business, a certain airport club, etc. The known geographic location information may also be used to selectively provide different access or privilege levels based on the geographic location, e.g., a user may have greater privilege/access levels at a first geographic location than from a second different geographic location. This known geographic location information may further be used to provide services to the user which are dependent upon the geographic location of the user. For more infor-

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mation on the use of geographic location information for providing geographic based services, please see U.S. Pat. No. 5,835,061, referenced above.

In step **212** the network provider may examine the received identification information, e.g., the System ID, or other identification information and determine whether the received identification information is known or recognized. In step **212** the method may also determine if other ID information is valid. If the identification information is determined to not be known, e.g., the System ID is unknown, then in step **222** the method may perform processing to account for the unknown identification information. Step **222** may also involve performing processing for an unknown or incorrect digital certificate or other unknown information.

In step **222**, where the identification information is determined to not be known or recognized, the method may select a default network provider for the user for network access. The default network provider may be the provider who maintains the wireless network system being used, or may be a randomly selected provider. In step **223** the user may be required to register with this provider to gain network access. This provider may then arrange for ad hoc billing of the user, such as by credit card. For example, the provider may present a web page on the user’s PCD **110** requesting the user to enter credit card information for access to the network. Operation then proceeds to step **232**.

Also, if the identification information is determined to not be known, the access or privilege level of the user may be set to a default level, e.g., the lowest possible level. This, for example, may allow the user to only have access to certain limited local resources, but no external access, e.g., to the Internet. Thus, for example, where the APs **120** are located in an airport, the user having a low access level, e.g., the user whose identification information is not known, may be granted access to certain local resources, such as coffee shops, bookstores, and advertising on the local LAN at the airport, but may not be provided with Internet access. Access to local resources may be allowed since this does not require the use of external facilities and hence does not consume off-property bandwidth, and thus is relatively inexpensive to provide. Alternatively, if the identification information of a user is determined to not be known, the system may provide some form of external access, which may be billed separately by an external Internet provider, without the user being able to view or use any local network resources.

If known identification information is determined to be received in step **212**, then in step **216** the method may determine the network provider which corresponds to the identification information (e.g., the System ID). In the preferred embodiment, a data structure comprising network provider information is stored in each of the access points **120**. In this embodiment, the respective access point with which the user is communicating receives the identification information and uses the identification information to obtain the appropriate or corresponding network provider to which the user of the PCD **110** is subscribed. In step **218** the respective access point **120** may also access the data structure to determine the appropriate access method or access level for providing data or packets to the respective network provider. The respective access point **120** may instead access this information from a separate data structure stored in MIB **150**.

In an alternate embodiment, the PCD **110** of the user may provide all of this information to the access point **120**. In this embodiment, the data structure containing the network provider data and access information may not be required to be

stored in the access points **120** or on the network. Alternatively, data may be stored on the network **130**, e.g., in the access points **120** or in the MIB **150**, which is used only to validate this information received from the user.

As discussed above, the data structure is preferably a table comprising a plurality of three-tuples wherein each tuple stores a set of identification information, the corresponding network provider associated with that identification information, and access information associated with that network provider and/or the user. An example of this data structure is shown in FIG. **5**. The data structure shown in FIG. **5** includes five different sets of three-tuples. It is noted that the data structure may take any of various forms.

The access information may include an access method, possibly including a destination address or other method by which data packets are routed to/from the respective site of the network provider or other method which directs that network access be provided by that network provider. The access information may also include an access level or privilege level that indicates which network resources that the user may access, e.g., whether the user is only allowed access to resources on the local network **130**, or is only or in addition allowed external access, such as Internet access.

Thus, when the access point **120** receives the identification information, the access point may simply use the identification information to index into a table containing this information to determine the appropriate network provider and the respective access method and/or access level.

It is noted that each of steps **212**, **216** and **218**, and **222** may be performed as one action or a series of related actions. In other words, when the access point **120** receives the identification information, if the identification information does not index into any of the entries in the data structure or table, then the identification information or System ID is determined to be unknown or not associated with a respective network provider as determined in step **212**. In this case, the default provider and default access level may be selected as performed in step **222**. If the identification information does index properly into an entry of the table, but the corresponding network provider does not have the necessary equipment to accommodate the user, then this may also be treated as unknown identification information, where another provider or the default provider may be selected as performed in step **222**.

If the identification information properly indexes into the table, then in steps **216** and **218** information from the respective entry of the table is accessed and used to determine a corresponding network provider which can accommodate the user's network access, as well as the associated method and access level for providing network access using the network provider.

After the network provider and associated access method/level have been determined in each of steps **216** and **218**, then in step **232** network access or network services may be provided to the portable computing device **110** through the determined network provider. For example, in step **232** the access point **120** to which the user is communicating may operate to provide data to/from a destination specified by the determined network provider using the method specified by the determined network provider, e.g., the method comprised in the table or data structure. In one embodiment, the access point **120** may operate simply as a bridge or router which operates to forward or route packets to the appropriate destination, e.g., to the network provider's network device **160** or to the provider's site. As noted above, the network provider may provide a network device **160** such as a router, which operates to route packets to the provider's site or

otherwise simply allow Internet access to the user. Thus in step **232** the method allows the personal computing device of the user access to the network using the user's provider.

In another embodiment, the access point **120** itself operates as a router to route packets to the determined network provider's site, which may be located on the Internet. Thus, in this embodiment, the network provider may not be required to provide any type of network device **160** to enable network access for its respective subscribers. Rather, data packets from the PCD **110** of the user may be routed to the network provider's site on the Internet, which may be located in any location.

In step **232** data is communicated between the PCD **110** and the respective destination specified by the network provider preferably using a secured technique. Examples of possible secured techniques include Layer **2** forwarding; various tunneling protocols such as PPTP, IPSEC, GRE, and IP-in-IP; and tagged VLANs (IEEE 802.1q), among others.

In one embodiment, in step **232** the access point **120** operates to direct PCDs **110** to an available communication channel, e.g., an available RF channel or other wireless channel, possibly based on information received from the PCD **110**. Thus the access point **120**, not the PCD **110**, may assign channels for communication. For example, the access point **120** may operate to direct a PCD **110** to an available communication channel (e.g., an RF channel) based on the identification information, e.g., the SID, received from the PCD **110**. The access point **120** may also operate to direct the PCD **110** to an available communication channel based on other types of identification or authentication information, or on the determined access level of the PCD. This allows an access point **120** to separate the communication traffic onto different channels based on the network provider being used, or based on the access or privilege level of the PCD **110**. For example, the access point **120** may assign a PCD **110** a communication channel based on whether the PCD **110** has access to private portions of the network.

In step **234** the selected network provider may record charges for the network access. In one embodiment, the charge rates may vary based upon the user's access/privilege level. In one embodiment, each of the network provider's respective devices **160** may maintain separate charge/billing information for each of their respective subscribers. Thus, the network device **160** of the selected network provider may record charges for the network access of the user. Alternatively, a computer system coupled to the network **130**, such as the MIB **150**, or another computer system, may receive information from the wireless access point **120** as to the determined network provider, and the computer system may maintain billing/charging information for each of a subset or all of the network providers. In one embodiment, billing information for the user may be stored on the PCD **110** and may be provided to the AP **120**.

As noted above, network charging information may also be based on known geographic information, as well as, for example, sponsorship or demographic information of the user, which may be provided to the access point in a digital certificate.

As noted above, the data structure or table containing network provider information may be stored in each of the access points **120**. Alternatively, the data structure may be stored in a separate computer system, such as the MIB **150**. In this latter instance, each of the access points **120** may operate to forward the identification information to the MIB or other computer system **150**, and this computer system performs steps **212**, **216** and **218** of determining the appro-

appropriate network provider and corresponding access method, or selecting the default provider. Once the network provider and access method have been determined in this embodiment, this information may be forwarded to the respective access point **120** for proper routing, or the respective access point **120** may forward data received from the PCD **110** of the user to the MIB **150** or an associated router for proper routing to the respective network provider's device **160** or to the appropriate site on the Internet.

Thus, in step **232** the PCD **110** of the user is allowed to obtain network access through his previously chosen network provider, i.e., through the network provider to which the user has previously subscribed, at an access level specified by the terms of the subscription. As noted above, the network provider may operate to maintain billing/charging information through its equipment **160**, at its site, or through a shared resource such as MIB **150**.

In one embodiment, also noted above, the billing information may be stored on the PCD **110** of the user, e.g., in the user's digital certificate. In this case, if the AP **120** answers the query of the PCD **110** and allows access after confirming the identification information, the system may allow for roaming and billing. This effectively allows users to roam on various network infrastructures, e.g., allows a user who is a subscriber of network provider A to roam on a network infrastructure operated and maintained by network provider B. Alternatively, certain portions of the network infrastructure may be built and maintained by a third party who is not a network provider, and subscribers of each of the various network providers may be able to roam onto this network, perhaps with a small fee being paid to the manager of the network infrastructure in addition to the fee normally paid to the network provider for network access. Further, users who have never previously subscribed to a network provider may be allowed to communicate with an AP **120** and select a network provider, or be assigned the default network provider, for access.

Different Access Levels

As noted above, in one embodiment, the data structure or table may store one or more different-access methods depending upon an access level received within the identification information. Thus, referring back to FIG. **1**, the network **130** may provide certain local network resources as well as external Internet access which may be both available to users having a first access level. Users with a second lower access level may not be entitled to external access, but may be simply able to view or utilize certain local network resources on network **130**. Users may also be selectively allowed to make 802.11 voice calls using the network, depending on access level. In one embodiment, the user's access level may indicate access to one or more network services including email, Internet access, or local network access, described in more detail below. In one embodiment, the access level may indicate access to one or more information services including, but not limited to, an area restaurant guide, a map of local stores, one or more discounts for merchandise or services of local stores, flight information, or a guide to local points of interest.

For example, in an airport scenario, a non-recognized user, or a user paying a lower fee, may have an access/privilege level that only allows him/her local content such as various airport advertising, airport information such as the layout of the airport, including where the restroom, restaurants, etc. are located, flight information, etc., but does not allow the non-recognized user external access, e.g., access to the Internet. A non-recognized user would of course also not

have any access to private corporate LAN's maintained on this network, such as the corporate LANs of airlines located at the airport.

If the wireless network system provides a mechanism for the user to register or subscribe to a network provider, then the user may do so and receive Internet access through that selected provider. As another alternative, the network system may provide a mechanism for the user to register or subscribe to an external network provider, e.g., and external ISP, perhaps with a small referral fee paid to the maintainer of the network system.

Alternatively, the network **130** may provide various local resources as well as external Internet access which are both available to users having a first access level, and users with a second access level may not be entitled to view or utilize these local network resources on network **130**, but may be simply provided some form of external access, such as external telephone access using VoIP or possibly a pathway to the Internet.

For example, where the network **130** and one or more wireless access points **120** are comprised in an airport, one or more airlines may maintain various computing resources on the local network **130** which are usable solely by airline employees and personnel. In this embodiment, PCDs **110** of airline employees may comprise identification information which indicates an access level that allows them access to the various computing resources on the network **130**. Thus, employees of a first airline such as American Airlines may have first access level information stored on their PCD **110** that entitles them to utilize certain American Airline computing resources on the network **130**, whereas employees of Delta Airlines may have second different access level information stored on their PCD **110** which enables use of only Delta Airlines computing resources located on the network **130** etc. For those users who are not airline employees or personnel, these users may have access information stored on their PCD **110** which only allows them external access toward the Internet and use of certain non-private local resources, but does not allow them to view or use any of the private computing resources on the network **130**. Thus, PCDs **110** of users may store various access level information comprised within the identification information which selectively allows access to certain resources on the local network **130**. This effectively allows private and public portions of the network **130**.

As another example, consider an office, such as a law firm office or business which maintains one or more wireless or wired access points **120**. Employees of the office may have first access level information (possibly of varying degrees) stored on their PCD **110** which enables them access to selected resources or all resources on this network **130**. However, visitors to this office which do not have this privilege or access level may be detected by a wireless or wired access point and not be allowed to view or use any of the resources on the local network **130**, but rather may simply be provided a port for complementary (or billable) external access to the Internet. Thus, a visitor or customer of the business who is physically present in the office and desires Internet access may utilize his PCD **110** to gain access to the Internet through the local network of the office **130**, without the visitor or customer being able to view any of the computing resources, file servers, etc. of that local network **130**. In addition, if the user's corporate intranet is web-based, the user may be allowed access to his own LAN computing resources remotely. This allows businesses to

provide customers and visitors with Internet access through its network **130** without compromising the security of the network **130**.

As noted above, in one embodiment, the known geographic location information may also be used to selectively provide different access or privilege levels based on the geographic location, e.g., a user may have greater privilege/access levels at a first geographic location than from a second different geographic location. For example, where the network **130** and one or more wireless access points **120** are comprised in an airport, a user may have a greater access level and hence access to more network resources from, for example, an airline club such as an Admiral's club, and the same user may have a lesser access level and hence access to fewer network resources from an airline gate. Thus the access level of a user may be based at least partly on the geographic location of the user. This may possibly be based on various agreements negotiated by service providers to "reward" users who are present at their geographic location, in a similar manner to which the network charge rate may also be based on the geographic location of the user.

Thus, in step **218**, where the method determines an access method for the network provider, the method may also determine one or more access levels or privilege levels contained within the identification information to determine whether the user should be provided with Internet access or should only have access to local resources on the network. The method may also determine the known geographic location of the user to aid in determining the access level as described above.

In step **232** the access point **120** or MIB **150** or other device operates to provide or route data depending upon this access level. Thus, users with the appropriate access level may have Internet access as well as be able to view and use resources on the network **130**, while users lacking this necessary access level may simply be provided with certain local network resources and not have any Internet access. Alternatively, users having a lower access or privilege level may be provided some form of external access, such as local telephone access using VoIP, 802.11 voice calls, or possibly complementary Internet access, without being able to view or use certain private network resources.

FIG. 6 illustrates one exemplary embodiment, where a PCD **110A** of a first user comprises identification information having an access level which indicates that the user has access only to the computing resources on the local network **130**. In this instance, once this access level has been verified as determined by a lookup in the table or data structure, data or packets from the PCD **110A** may be routed to various computing resources on the local network as shown by the arrows designated "1". In contrast, PCD **110B** of a second user comprises identification information which includes a greater access level which encompasses accessing local resources on network **130** as well as Internet access. In this instance, in addition to local network access, data or packets may also be routed from the PCD **110B** through the access point **120** and directly out to an external access port for Internet access. Thus, the user who does not have the appropriate access or privilege level is able to view or use any computing resources on the network **130**, but cannot gain Internet access through the network **130**. As noted above, the system can also be configured whereby the user who does not have the appropriate access or privilege level is only allowed Internet access, and users with higher privilege levels are able to view or use computing resources on the network **130**.

Thus, the present invention enables multiple levels of network access and service to be provided to subscribers of one or more wireless network providers. For example, one communication service may be referred to as a Wayport network (Wayport is a Registered Trademark of Wayport, Inc. of Austin, Tex.). A Wayport network may be compatible with other types of similar networks maintained by other companies. For example, if Wayport networks are installed in the Austin-Bergstrom International airport and similar 'XYZ' networks are installed in a hotel in downtown Austin, a user that has subscribed to Wayport networks at a particular privilege level may be able to use the same level of services offered at the downtown hotel by XYZ. More specifically, a user that has registered with a Wayport network (e.g., has entered demographic data and agreed to pay transaction costs) may not need to register with XYZ. The user may use other network providers (e.g., XYZ networks) and still only be billed from one company (e.g., the provider of the Wayport network with which the user is registered). This may be accomplished through agreements established between different network providers.

For example, a Wayport network-registered user may attempt to connect to an XYZ network in the downtown hotel. In the embodiment described herein, the access point **120** maintained by the XYZ network may still answer or communicate with the PCD **110**, even though the PCD **110** provides identification information that is different from, and possibly not even recognized by, the access point **120**. In this example, assume the XYZ network notices from the PCD ID information that the user is not registered on the XYZ network, but is registered on the WAYPORT network. The XYZ network may perform a verification of the PCD ID by querying a database of registered PCD IDs on the WAYPORT network. The XYZ network may acquire demographic information on the credentials of the user. If the credentials of a user are not acceptable, access to the XYZ network may be denied. If the credentials are acceptable, the XYZ network may grant the user access to various goods, information and/or service providers. In one embodiment, the user may be granted access corresponding to the user's Wayport subscription access level. In another embodiment, the user may be granted a default access level. The XYZ network may inform the user (via a message on the user's PCD) that there is an additional cost for accessing the XYZ network as a non-registered user. The user may then have the choice of paying the additional fees for the services or disconnecting. In addition, the user may have the option of registering with the XYZ network to avoid paying 'roaming' fees.

Wireless AP Usage of Multiple Channels

A wireless access point **120** can use one of a plurality of different RF (radio frequency) channels for communication with portable computing devices of users. For example, a wireless access point **120** can use one of RF channels **1** through **11**. As is well known, RF channels **1**, **6** and **11** are non-overlapping, with the remainder of these channels being partially overlapping with other channels.

According to one embodiment of the present invention, each wireless access point can communicate on one or more, e.g. a plurality of or all of, the available wireless channels, e.g., the available RF channels. Furthermore, each access point **120** can control which channel the portable computing device **110** of a client is able to use. In one embodiment, each portable computing device may scan each of the RF channels until it detects a wireless access point **120** at one of the channels.

In one embodiment, one or more of the wireless access points may each utilize a plurality of the RF channels, e.g., may use each of the non-overlapping channels **1**, **6** and **11** to effectively provide up to three times the channel capacity. Thus, the wireless access point **120** may be able to control allocations of a plurality or all of the respective RF channels to selectively obtain higher bandwidth when appropriate, or to simply accommodate a greater number of subscribers. Thus, if a wireless access point using only one RF channel could only handle fifty PCD's **110** on that respective channel, the wireless access point may operate to use all three non-overlapping RF channels to effectively triple this capacity to a total of 150 simultaneous PCD's **110**.

As another example, if the wireless access point **120** is only communicating with one portable computing device **110**, then the wireless access point **120** may optionally or selectively use each of the three non-overlapping RF channels to produce effectively three times the bandwidth for this communication. As additional portable computer devices come into communication with the respective wireless access point, **120**, the wireless access point **120** may selectively allocate different channels to different ones of these PCD's as needed. Further, if more than three PCD's are communicating with the respective wireless access point, the wireless access point **120** may partition one or more of the respective channels for the respective users, such as using wireless Ethernet Collision Sense Multiple Access/Collision Detection (CSMA/CD) or other multiple access schemes such as TDMA, FDMA, or CDMA, among others.

In one embodiment, as described above with respect to step **232**, the access point **120** operates to direct PCDs **110** to an available channel, possibly based on information received from the PCD **110**. Thus the access point **120**, not the PCD **110**, may assign channels for communication. For example, the an access point **120** may operate to direct a PCD **110** to an available communication channel (e.g., an RF channel) based on the identification information, e.g., the SID, received from the PCD **110**. The access point **120** may also operate to direct the PCD **110** to an available communication channel based on other types of identification or authentication information, or on the determined access level of the PCD. This allows an access point **120** to separate the communication traffic onto different channels based on the network provider being used, or based on the access or privilege level of the PCD **110**. For example, the access point **120** may assign a PCD **110** a communication channel based on whether the PCD **110** has access to private portions of the network.

Thus, various embodiments of the present invention provide systems and methods for enabling a wireless network infrastructure to support multiple access levels for users.

While the present invention has been described with reference to particular embodiments, it will be understood that the embodiments are illustrative and that the invention scope is not so limited. Any variations, modifications, additions, and improvements to the embodiments described are possible. These variations, modifications, additions, and improvements may fall within the scope of the inventions as detailed within the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for providing access to a distributed wireless network system, wherein the distributed wireless network system includes a plurality of access points coupled to a network, the method comprising:

a first access point of the plurality of access points receiving identification information from a portable computing device, wherein the identification informa-

tion indicates an access level, wherein the first access point and the computing device communicate in a wireless fashion;

determining a geographic location of the portable computing device;

determining an access level for the portable computing device after receiving the identification information, wherein the access level is based on the geographic location of the portable computing device and the identification information; and

providing network access to the portable computing device based on the access level.

2. The method of claim **1**, further comprising: providing data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined access level.

3. The method of claim **1**, further comprising: the first access point receiving data from the portable computing device; and

providing the data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined access level.

4. The method of claim **3**, wherein said providing the data comprises:

providing the data to one or more resources on the network to allow the portable computing device access to the one or more resources on the network if the access level is a first access level; and

providing the data to a destination for external access out of the network to only allow the portable computing device access to other networks if the access level is a second access level;

wherein, if the access level is the second access level, the data is not provided to the one or more resources on the network.

5. The method of claim **1**, wherein the identification information comprises a System ID of the portable computing device, wherein the System ID indicates the access level of the portable computing device.

6. The method of claim **1**, wherein the distributed wireless network system includes a memory medium which stores a data structure comprising a list of identification information and a corresponding list of access levels;

wherein said determining the access level for the portable computing device includes accessing the memory medium and using the received identification information to determine the access level.

7. The method of claim **6**, wherein the memory medium is comprised in one or more of the access points.

8. The method of claim **1**, wherein the access level of the portable computing device is comprised in the identification information, wherein the access level is stored in a memory comprised in the portable computing device, and wherein said determining the access level for the portable computing device comprises receiving the access level from the portable computing device.

9. The method of claim **1**, wherein the access level indicates access to one or more network services including email, Internet access, or local network access.

10. The method of claim **1**, wherein the access level indicates access to one or more information services including an area restaurant guide, a map of local stores, one or more discounts for merchandise or services of local stores, flight information, or a guide to local points of interest.

11. The method of claim **1**, further comprising: maintaining and storing a usage amount by the portable computing device;

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wherein charges for access by the portable computing device to the network are dependent upon the usage amount and the access level.

12. The method of claim **1**, further comprising: assigning a wireless communication channel for communication between the first access point and the portable computing device based on the determined access level.

13. A wireless network system, comprising: a wireless network;
a plurality of wireless access points coupled to the network, wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to communicate with a portable computing device, wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is configured to receive identification information from the portable computing device indicating an access level of the portable computing device;

wherein each wireless access point of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to determine a geographic location of the portable computing device, wherein the wireless access point is communicating with the portable computing device;

wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to determine the access level indicated in the identification information; and

wherein network access is provided to the portable computing device based on the determined access level and the geographic location of the portable computing device.

14. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to provide data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined access level.

15. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to: receive data from the portable computing device; and provide the data received from the portable computing device to a destination based on the determined access level.

16. The wireless network system of claim **15**, wherein, in providing the data, said one or more of the plurality of wireless access points are operable to:

provide the data to one or more resources on the network to allow the portable computing device access to the one or more resources on the network if the access level is a first access level; and

provide the data to a destination for external access out of the network to only allow the portable computing device access to other networks if the access level is a second access level;

wherein, if the access level is the second access level, the data is not provided to the one or more resources on the network.

17. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein the identification information comprises a System ID of the portable computing device, wherein the System ID indicates the access level of the portable computing device.

18. The wireless network system of claim **13**, further comprising:

a memory medium coupled to the network which stores a data structure comprising a list of identification information and a corresponding list of access levels;

wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to determine the access level for the portable

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computing device by accessing the memory medium and using the received identification information to determine the access level.

19. The wireless network system of claim **18**, wherein the memory medium is comprised in one or more of the wireless access points.

20. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein the identification information includes the access level, wherein the access level is stored in a memory comprised in the portable computing device, and wherein each of the plurality of wireless access points is operable to determine the access level for the portable computing device by receiving the access level from the portable computing device.

21. The wireless network system of claim **13**, further comprising:

wherein one or more of the wireless access points are operable to determine an access level for the portable computing device after receiving the identification information; and

wherein said one or more of the wireless access points are operable to assign a wireless communication channel for communication between the first access point and the portable computing device based on the determined access level.

22. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein the access level indicates access to one or more network services including email, Internet access, or local network access.

23. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein the access level indicates access to one or more information services including an area restaurant guide, a map of local stores, one or more discounts for merchandise or services of local stores, flight information, or a guide to local points of interest.

24. The wireless network system of claim **13**, wherein one or more of the wireless access points are operable to maintain and store a usage amount by the portable computing device, and wherein charges for access by the portable computing device to the network are dependent upon the usage amount and the access level.

25. The method of claim **1**, wherein the geographic location of the portable computing device is determined to be within a vicinity of the first access point.

26. The method of claim **1**, wherein the first access point performs said determining the geographic location of the portable computing device.

27. The method of claim **1**, wherein the portable computing device performs said determining the geographic location of the portable computing device;

the method further comprising: the portable computing device transmitting the geographic location of the portable computing device; and

the first access point receiving the geographic location of the portable computing device.

28. The method of claim **1**, wherein the geographic location of the portable computing device includes a geographic location of the first access point.

29. The method of claim **28**, wherein the plurality of access points are arranged at known geographic locations.

30. The method of claim **1**, wherein the identification information includes an IEEE 802.11 system identification (SID).

31. The method of claim **1**, wherein the identification information includes a media access control (MAC) identification.

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32. The method of claim 1,
wherein the identification information includes a name
associated with a network service provider.
33. The method of claim 1,
wherein the identification information includes a digital
certificate.
34. The method of claim 12, wherein the first access point
is operable to concurrently use a plurality of radio frequency
(RF) channels for communicating with one or more portable
computing devices.
35. The method of claim 34, wherein the plurality of RF
channels for communicating with the one or more portable
computing device includes at least two non-overlapping RF
channels.
36. The method of claim 34, wherein the first access point
is operable to communicate using a first RF channel with a
first subset of the one or more portable computing devices,
wherein the first access point is operable to communicate
using a second RF channel with a second subset of the one
or more portable computing devices.
37. The method of claim 36, wherein the first RF channel
and the second RF are non-overlapping RF channels.
38. The wireless network system of claim 13,
wherein the geographic location of the portable comput-
ing device is determined to be within a vicinity of the
wireless access point communicating with the portable
computing device.
39. The wireless network system of claim 13, wherein the
geographic location of the portable computing device
includes a geographic location of the wireless access point
communicating with the portable computing device.
40. The wireless network system of claim 39, wherein the
plurality of access points are arranged at known geographic
locations.
41. The wireless network system of claim 13,
wherein the identification information includes an IEEE
802.11 system identification (SID).
42. The wireless network system of claim 13,
wherein the identification information includes a media
access control (MAC) identification.
43. The wireless network system of claim 13,
wherein the identification information includes a name
associated with a network service provider.
44. The wireless network system of claim 13,
wherein the identification information includes a digital
certificate.
45. The wireless network system of claim 21, wherein
said one or more wireless access points are operable to
concurrently use a plurality of radio frequency (RF) chan-
nels for communicating with one or more portable comput-
ing devices.

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46. The wireless network system of claim 45, wherein the
plurality of RF channels for communicating with the one or
more portable computing device includes at least two non-
overlapping RF channels.
47. The wireless network system of claim 45, wherein
each of said one or more wireless access point is operable to
communicate using a first RF channel with a first subset of
the one or more portable computing devices, wherein the
wireless access point is operable to communicate using a
second RF channel with a second subset of the one or more
portable computing devices.
48. The wireless network system of claim 47, wherein the
first RF channel and the second RF are non-overlapping RF
channels.
49. A carrier medium comprising program instructions for
providing network access to a distributed network system,
wherein the distributed network system comprises a plural-
ity of wireless access points, wherein the program instruc-
tions are executable by a processor to:
- receive identification information from a portable com-
puting device, wherein the identification information
indicates an access level, wherein the identification
information is received through a first wireless access
point of the plurality of wireless access points;
- determine a geographic location which comprises the
portable computing device;
- determine an access level for the portable computing
device after receiving the identification information,
wherein the access level is based on the geographic
location which comprises the portable computing
device and the identification information; and
- provide network access to the portable computing device
based on the access level.
50. The carrier medium of claim 49,
wherein the identification information includes an IEEE
802.11 system identification (SID).
51. The carrier medium of claim 49,
wherein the identification information includes a media
access control (MAC) identification.
52. The carrier medium of claim 49,
wherein the identification information includes a name
associated with a network service provider.
53. The carrier medium of claim 49,
wherein the identification information includes a digital
certificate.

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